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ABSTRACT

Students cannot be trained to perceive the complicated richness of literary art, but they may be educated to align their sensibilities with writer's clues when a literary work requires an intuitive reading. For instance, William Faulkner admired Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn" and various commentators have noted the urn-like imagery in Faulkner's experimental novel "Go Down, Moses." The idea in the ode that most intrigued Faulkner was that of the lover who can never kiss his beloved, "though winning near the goal." Faulkner experimented with the imagery of stasis throughout his career, using the technique of freezing time to examine moments of unfulfilled pursuit in "Go Down, Moses," an artistic unit of seven stories that he called a novel. The best known story is "The Bear," in which Faulkner's image of static pursuit takes on a resonance inspired and informed by the idea of pleasure implicit in capturing intact, and yet not destroying. The bear is like the figure on the urn, out of an old dead time, but still most truly and beautifully living. Faulkner creates two worlds in the story, that of the old wild life representing truth and that of the modern South, representing change. The final comment on unfulfilled pursuit in the novel sums up the idea of decorum implicit in pursuit in all the stories--what is important is that the pursuit is carried on properly. (NKA)

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TEACHING A FAULKNER NOVEL USING RESEARCH FROM THE DISCIPLINE OF ENGLISH

by

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Daniel G. Ford

We cannot train students to perceive the deep and complicated richness of literary art. We cannot rely on language for the qualities we seek to convey are often ineffable. We cannot rely on requiring memorization, stacking up facts, learning the lecture notes. We can educate them, though, so that they take intuitive leaps when the interpretation of literary art requires them to align their deepest sensibilities with the "hints" of the writer.

I have loved Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" for a long time and I love to teach the poem: it gives me the opportunity to present that profound quintessence of art--the permanence of truth and beauty--in a simple, straightforward way. William Faulkner loved Keats's Ode, too, and he often commented on its worth. So, I was excited when I began to notice Urn-like imagery in one of Faulkner's finest works, an experimental novel entitled Go Down, Moses.

As I attempted to express this excitment to my students, I found that I needed further study, a more coherent argument, to get them to share my incoherent delight. So, I went to the main source in the field of literary scholarship, the MLA International Bibliography, and found that a few of my colleagues in the field had commented in print upon the influence of Keats's poem on Faulkner. Some of them had written specifically about Go Down, Moses.

Their comments helped me focus on one idea in the Ode which intrigued Faulkner the most--that lover who can never kiss his beloved, "though winning near the goal." The idea serves as a stabilizer for the diverse elements in Go Down, Moses. The novelist was clearly interested in unfulfilled pursuit.

In discussing his early hunting experiences, Faulkner said, "the pursuit is the thing. not the reward, not the gain" (Gwynn and Blotner 272). That idea led the author to experiment with imagery of stasis throughout his career. The familiar Faulknerian technique of freezing time so that moments of unfulfilled pursuit may be examined is certainly manifest in Go Down, Moses. The technique and the static imagery it calls forth help shape the seven stories into an artistic unit which Faulkner called a novel rather than a collection. Michael Millgate rightly terms Go Down, Moses Faulkner's culminating work, arguing that it contains practically all of the major themes and techniques of the entire corpus (214).

Commentary has been concerned mainly with Isaac McCaslin's developing character first as a boy in the wilderness, then as a young man in the commissary, and finally as an old man in "Delta Autumn." The best story in the work, "The Bear," has naturally received greatest attention, but it has been viewed in most college classrooms as an autonomous story, not as a part of a novel. All of the stories are related to each other by static, Urn-like imagery, by similar descriptions done in terms of statuary and relief, by frozen moments and illusions of timelessness Faulkner produces through any number of means in depicting the mad pursuits of his characters.

The center of the motif of static pursuit comes in part 4 of "The Bear" with the actual quotation of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Expressions of "Forever wilt thou love and she be fair" resound lyrically in all the stories, reflecting the structure of the work as a whole, and the artistic, though sadly unrealistic, idea of Isaac McCaslin regarding his inheritance.

Quite early, Olga Vickery noted the structural function of pursuit

by commenting upon the many levels of the hunt motif as they buttress the theme of black-white relationships (124-125). But the hunt, the idea of pursuit for its own sake, functions in other and more subtle ways as well. Faulkner himself claimed that pursuit is better than fulfillment and Blanche H. Gelfant has observed most articulately that Ike "saw in the Urn's romantic pursuit, the lover chasing but never reaching the girl, a moral paradigm for the hunt that led him to pursue, though never to kill, the bear. In both actions, moral value lay in the chase itself rather than in the attainment of its object. Both pursuits must continue but never lead to consummation, for fulfillment is the very condition for perpetuation of the ideal--of love in the Ode, and virtue and courage in 'The Bear'" (63). Such paradoxical pursuits in Go Down, Moses, mad as they sometimes seem, warrant a close study for presentation to literature students in terms of theme, structure, and the artist's temporal vision.

Weldon Thornton's excellent article helped me relate the structure of the first story "Was" to that of the larger work. He shows the theme of pursuit at work in even the slightest details (85). And, I understood the second story, "The Fire and the Hearth," in terms of imagery and the poetry of stasis thanks to commentators as diverse as William B. Stone (93-94) and Cleanth Brooks (19).

Even though the next story, "Pantaloon in Black," is not as neatly related to the other parts of Go Down, Moses as one might wish, there are thematic interrelationships of both objects and events (Thornton 75). Faulkner was right to include it as part of the novel, for, as John L. Clemen points out, its main idea, Rider's humanity, is in keeping with the overall design of the book--namely, to show the humanity of black people (170-181).

Although "The Old People" is a fascinating and moving tale in its

own right, it seems to be prologue to "The Bear" and, therefore, part of it. It introduces Isaac McCaslin, the boy, in confused pursuit of deer and worthiness and understanding and immortality. It also introduces Sam Fathers, whose pursuit is for solitude and death.

There are several references to time in the story, some of them forced, such as the moment Ike tries to "decelerate the dizzy rushing of time in which the buck...was moving" (180), the prosey moment when Ike becomes a true hunter, "that morning something had happened to him: in less than a second he had ceased forever to be the child he was yesterday" (181), and the abstract, non-poetic expression of the eternal now in Isaac's consciousness, "gradually to the boy those old times would cease to be old times and would become a part of the boy's present, not only as if they had happened yesterday but as if they were still happening...And more: as if some of them had not happened yet but would occur tomorrow, until at last it would seem...that he himself had not come into existence yet" (171). But the best and most poetic expression of pursuit in stasis so philosophically described in those passages, is in the only Urn-like frozen moment in "The Old People":

> The buck still and forever leaped, the shaking gunbarrels coming constantly and forever steady at last, crashing, and still out of his instant of immortality the buck sprang, forever immortal. (178)

This "poem," which could be entitled "The Buck Forever," both culminates the frozen moments of the collection to that point and, because it is the first absolutely arrested image of pursuit, looks forward to those moments to come. It especially foreshadows old Isaac's heavenly dream of the buck still and forever leaping as he dozes, corpse-like, on his narrow cot in "Delta Autumn." By arresting the moment of the deer's death into Urn-like relief, Faulkner gives the animal the absolute immortality

of the figures on Keats's Urn. The buck will always be fair and Isaac will never have to grieve. With this splendid image, Faulkner sets the timeless and immortal stage for his masterpiece, "The Bear." Since this is the story most English teachers concentrate upon, let me tell you exactly what I tell my students about it.

I show them how Faulkner's familiar imagery of stasis takes on a richness in "The Bear," a resonance inspired and informed by the idea of pleasure implicit in capturing intact, and yet not destroying. Faulkner imitates the static pursuit of the lover on Keats's Urn in explaining Isaac's attitude toward the buck and Old Ben. Also, the Platonic idea of Truth associated with the Urn is a significant factor in Ike's relinquishment of his inheritance.

When the hunting party goes into Big Bottom each year, "they were going not to hunt bear and deer but to keep yearly rendezvous with the bear which they did not even intend to kill" (194). Major de Spain comments upon the value of pursuit after having wounded and lost Old Ben: "Never mind....It was a damned fine race. And we drew blood" (226). Old Ben himself participated in his own annual mad pursuit to assure his fierce liberty by jeopardizing it. The bear is like the figures on the Urn, out of an old dead time, but still most truly and beautifully living, "not even a mortal beast but an anachronism indomitable and invincible out of an old dead time, a phantom, epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life" (193).

I try to show students that Faulkner creates two worlds in the "Bear," that of the old wild life representing truth and that of the modern South, representing change. The irony is, of course, that the old wild life, symbolized by Old Ben, Sam Fathers, the wilderness, and, perhaps to some degree by Boon Hoggenbeck, changes too in order to accommodate the modern

South. That irony is captured most succinctly in the episode of the snake in part 5.

Here, Ike is a teenager, having been initiated into worthiness and still not mindful of the taint in his inheritance. Even though Faulkner presents him as a kind of poet, mature enough to acknowledge the necessity for grief and wise enough to understand that glory exists because of the transient nature of life, he nevertheless insists upon absolute unchanging nature represented by the wilderness. So the irony is intense when Faulkner makes us feel, despite Ike's lyrical convictions, that Sam Fathers may be as much the snake in Eden as old Carothers is. After all, Sam's wisdom proves useless to Ike in living through times of rapid change (Thornton 100). The snake seemed to be

> an entity walking on two feet and free of all laws of mass and balance and should have been because even now he could not quite believe that...walking head could have been one snake...standing with one hand raised as Sam had stood that afternoon six years ago when Sam led him into the wilderness and showed him and he ceased to be a child, speaking the old tongue which Sam had spoken that day without premeditation either: "Chief," he said: "Grandfather." (329-330)

Even though here and elsewhere in "The Bear" Faulkner attempts to merge and blend reality and perfection (Gelfant 47), there is a sense most often of two worlds, the absolute one epitomized by the Urn, and the tainted and mutable one. The artist expresses the dichotomy both temporally and spatially. There is a permeating sense, for example, of a pure and absolute timelessness out of which human time flows. "It seemed to him that he could see them, the two of them, shadowy in the limbo from which time emerged and became time" (204). Similarly, there is a sense of absolute immobility from which flows motion. The bear "did not emerge, appear: it was just there, immobile, fixed in the green and windless noon's hot dappling" (209).

In regard to the idea of arrested time and motion, Faulkner said in an "interview" in Paris Review (which Malcolm Cowley believes Faulkner composed rather than performed for his friend Jean Stein) that the artist should arrest motion in order to preserve it to move again in the future. Keats's Ode was important to Faulkner because it is an example of life arrested for future contemplation. It is his model for much of the imagery in "The Bear" (Cavanaugh 2783A-84A).

The climax of "The Bear" is the actual killing or sacrifice of Old Ben at the green altar to which Sam has led the party. All the nearby towns are emptied of their folk this pious morn. But only a few are privileged to witness the frozen moment, the statue, of the sacrifice (Sams 634):

> For an instant they almost resembled a piece of statuary: the clinging dog, the bear, the man astride its back...It didn't collapse, crumple. It fell all of a piece. (241)

In the rich stream of consciousness narration in part 4, the memory of McCaslin Edmond's actual reading of the Ode resounds as a stabilizer for the myriad associations called forth by the ledgers. Isaac delves into the world of tainted inheritance from multiple perspectives: historical, Biblical, poetic, and classical.

When Isaac and his cousin remember the Ode and McCaslin's interpretation of it--"[Keats] was talking about truth. Truth is one. It doesn't change. It covers all things which touch the heart"(297)--Ike hopes to perceive the ledgers as harmlessly and beautifully absolute. "What the old books contained would be after all these years fixed immutable, finished, unalterable, harmless"(268). But the ledgers cannot be perceived as truth and beauty, even though they are perfect as frozen symbols for the South, "that chronicle which was a whole land in minature, which multiplied and compounded was the entire South" (293).

At a crucial point in part 4, Isaac realizes that the ledgers, far from being beautiful and harmless, may be seen as God's record of evil, open--

> before the Throne Itself for a last perusal and contemplation and refreshment of the Allknowledgable before the yellowed pages and the brown thin ink in which was recorded the injustice and a little at least of its amelioration and restitution faded back forever into the anonymous communal original dust. (261)

That brilliant description of the ledgers freezes them into symbolic configrations antithetical to the Urn. They are symbols of that other world of change and dust and decay and eternal nothingness. Faulkner sees in everything its own opposite. The ledgers signify corruption in the same manner in which the Urn signifies spiritual purity (Gelfant 46-47, 55).

But, as I have pointed out, Faulkner sandwiches between the disillusioned Isaac of the commissary in part 4 and sadder but wiser Isaac of "Delta Autumn" the lush Eden of the teenaged Ike in part 5 where Faulkner returns to the imagery of stasis related to Keats's ode. Ike insists upon the eternality of the wilderness and denies the possibility of death.

Acknowledging that no single character speaks for Faulkner (Millgate 207), least of all, perhaps, Isaac McCaslin, I conclude my discussion of "The Bear" speculatively. It is in this Eden of part 5 that we find Boon at the gum tree. Critics have written a great deal about the scene but perhaps not enough about Boon. "[T]ime [was] merely something [Boon] walked through as he did through air, aging him no more than air did" (228). Even though there is a serpent in Eden, there is also a Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and at least one unfallen Adam who will not eat of it fruit. Two if you count Isaac.

The theme of mad pursuit is softened considerably in "Delta Autumn." I won't give a thorough commentary on that story, though I would like

to point out that Isaac McCaslin in his seventies is quite a different character from the idealist poet of "The Bear." He declares in the very first paragraph of the story that even the sea will dissolve away. But that does not keep him from seeking the glory of the wilderness and of his past. Still, it is significant that Faulkner's description of his remembrance is in sequential, clock-calendar time rather than in aspects of the absolute or durational eternality.

Yet in Isaac's dream near the end of the story, he seems to be in heaven. The Urn's eternal joy of pursuit remains intact and unalterable in Isaac's heart where there is--

> a dimension free of both time and space [where he moved] again among the shades of tall unaxed trees and sightless brakes where the wild strong immortal game ran forever before the tireless belling immortal hounds, falling and rising phoenix-like to the sounding guns. (354)

Moses went down and freed the children of Israel from one kind of slavery to the long enslavement of pursuit for the promised land which he, himself, could not enter. Like the figures on Keats's urn, Isaac McCaslin both does and does not enter the promised land there on his narrow cot, arms folded.

The major mad pursuit of the final story, "Go Down, Moses," is Gavin Steven's quest to do right in his community. This story is made of the same dust as "Pantaloon in Black." As he does in that story, Faulkner makes some effort to arrest motion in the imagery of statuary. But immediately following the image, he affirms the transience of man's life by showing its ultimate end. Directly after this description, Samuel Worsham is executed:

> The negroid hair had been treated so that it covered the skull like a cap, in a single neat-ridged sweep, with the appearance of having been lacquered, the part trimmed out with a razor, so that the head resembled a bronze head, imperishable and enduring. (369)

Regardless, that head, and the rest of the corpse was in the casket which the Jefferson Negro undertakers met at the train. They "carried it to the hearse and snatched the wreaths and floral symbols of man's ultimate and inevitable end briskly out and slid the casket in and flung the flowers back and clapped-to the door" (382).

The final comment on pursuit in the novel sums up the idea of decorum implicit in pursuit in all the stories. What is pursued does not matter; whether or not it is caught is of little consequence. What is important is that the pursuit is carried on properly. The pursuits of all the stories resound in this statement from Gavin Stevens:

> It doesn't matter to her now. Since it had to be and she couldn't stop it, and now that it's all over and done and finished, she doesn't care how he died. She just wanted him home, but she wanted him to come home right. She wanted that casket and those flowers and the hearse and she wanted to ride through town behind it in a car. (383)

The decorum of pursuit plays a large role in much of the world's literature; so it is not remarkable that the idea is thematic in Go Down, Moses. But in that work, mad pursuit presented through imagery of stasis, goes beyond thematic to structural. The seven stories are related to each other more by Urn-like imagery than by anything else. This amalgam of imagery, theme, and structure results from a deep and complicated quality in William Faulkner's vision of time and in his idea of artist's function, a quality I hope my students are glimpsing, thanks to the stimulation of my publishing colleagues in the discipline of English. For a more thorough treatment of the ideas in this paper, I recommend my essay in Volume VIII, Number 2 of College Literature (Spring, 1981).

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